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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000165

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR WALLER, PARIS FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: CORRECTED ARREST DATE: CYBER-DISSIDENT TRIAL WILL  
CONTINUE; EUROPEANS DEBATE FUTURE LEVEL OF REPRESENTATION  
AT POLITICAL TRIALS

REF: A. 2001 DAMASCUS 03245  
[B](#). 2002 DAMASCUS 03302  
[C](#). 2005 DAMASCUS 01220

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Web journalist Habib Saleh, arrested on October 16, faced the Second Criminal Court in Damascus on December 1 to answer for articles posted on the internet deemed threateningly critical of the state. The judge in the case prevented the public from attending what was supposed to be an open trial. Only Saleh's lawyers, Khalil Matouk and Jihan Amin, were permitted entrance. According to the lawyers, the court took no specific action on the case, but scheduled a new hearing for January 20, 2009. Saleh's wife, who was present at the courthouse, told us that Saleh is in "good health" and is more comfortable than when he first arrived at Adra prison, where he is currently being held. She stated that Saleh's initial cellmates were extremely hardened criminals who were generally intimidating and who reported back to the guards everything Saleh did and said. Mrs. Saleh said his situation "is better" now. She also informed us that she and her family are able to visit Saleh on a weekly basis.

[1](#)2. (C) Habib Saleh faces criminal charges under articles 285-298, and 374 of the Syrian Penal Code for "weakening national sentiment" and "inciting civil and sectarian war," according to human rights observers. Saleh, who was most recently arrested on October 16 in his home town of Tartus, has been the target of SARG retribution for his political writings twice before. In 2002 he was sentenced to three years in prison (ref B) for his activities during the "Damascus Spring" (ref A-C) and was released on September 9, [1](#)2004. Police arrested him again on May 29, 2005 for "spreading mendacious information," according to Reporters Sans Frontieres, and sentenced him to three years in prison. He was released on September 12, 2007. For the current charges against him, Saleh could receive up to 15 years in prison.

[1](#)3. (C) International diplomatic presence at the trial was minimal. The French and Swiss embassies were represented by interns. The only Embassy officers were from the Netherlands and Canadian Embassies. One diplomatic contact told us that among the EU embassies there was "a discussion going on" about whether they should "scale back" their representation at political trials. He intimated that diplomatic representation might be less frequent and at a much lower level than in the past.

CONNELLY